

FOR THE HONOR OF A PRINCESS

By F. K. Scribner

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The Duke de Biart, a nobleman of ancient ancestry and a young man of great accomplishments, had disappeared from the court and with him the Princess Alice. It was known to the king that the duke had sought to be a churchman, being of gloomy mind and much given to moodiness. But Henry, having small desire to see so great a nobleman turn monk, had played right skillfully the dark eyes of his royal kinswoman against the church.

Strange it was that the duke had not bided his time until the king were ready for a royal wedding. As for me, humble lieutenant of the musketeers that I am, I knew that the princess loved him not, for I had been chosen by his majesty to guard her person and saw her daily. Right well I knew—But that belongs not in this story.

The most important thing was that my king had bidden me, in great secrecy, to choose but one follower and with him to ride to the duke's chateau at M.

The honor of the princess rested in my hand, of which fact Paris must not know.

It was an hour past midnight when I, with the Chevalier de Rosset at my side, rode forth from Paris. De Rosset was in cheerful mood.

"Zounds!" said he, snapping his fingers briskly. "Methinks this Duke de Biart hath o'ershot the mark. Plotting was bad enough, yet he must need, having ridden with his princess beyond the walls, lay violent hands upon her person. Had he but waited, the king's desire had given her to him."

To my mind also came the thought the man must be truly mad; but, despite the weight of the occasion, something within me rejoiced that it lay within my power to undo the duke and return the princess to the king, her uncle.

The duke's dwelling lay some leagues from Paris, so the first dawn overtook us as we rode from the forest which surrounded the chateau on three sides. The place was of some strength, built in the days of the king's grandfather, so perchance some obstacle might lie between us and an entrance.

But upon our reaching the entrance to the dwelling we found it indeed most poorly guarded in that the guard had unbarricaded the door, the day being full upon us. Moreover, I perceived he was no other than one who had served the king, an ex-musketeer of mine own company.

Seeing me, he stood open mouthed, saluting with much ceremony, nor showed he any disposition to bar our progress.

"Faith," replied he to my greeting, "thou art come from Paris at a most early hour. The duke is yet abed, having come hither but yesterday in company with his cousin, who suffers from a malady."

"What now?" cried De Rosset. "Is the lady stricken?"

"That she is," replied the witless fellow, "for the duke bore her before him on the saddle and bath given her in charge of the women, bidding them look to it she commit no injury upon her person."

"Come they alone?" asked I.

"Only the two," replied he. "Art from the king?"

De Rosset plucked my sleeve. "Twas told in Paris," said he, "the duke's kinswoman had lost her wits, and 'tis the royal pleasure we learn concerning her condition. It is the purpose of his majesty to send his leech to cure her if occasion warrants it."

The fellow nodded. "The duke is much in favor with the king," said he. "Would see the woman who guards the maid?"

De Rosset cast upon me a look of triumph. "Twere most fitting," replied he, "for, the hour being early, 'twere an ill thing to arouse the duke, thy master."

"'Tis a most strange thing," muttered De Rosset as we followed the servant through the long and dimly lighted corridor, "beyond comprehension, and methinks there comes a queer twist to our errand. Either this duke be drunk or truly mad; therefore look to it, M. de Marc, that no trap be set for us."

Presently we came unto the door of a chamber, and the servant drew back, signifying 'twas the room wherein was confined the princess.

"Go thou," said De Rosset gruffly. "Thou hast done thine errand." And he put in the fellow's palm a silver piece.

"I will remain here," said he, the man being gone, "and if any come to know our business I will deal with him." So saying, he unsheathed his sword and took his stand beside the door, upon which I knocked softly.

A voice from within demanded who sought admittance at so early an hour, when 'twas small courtesy to disturb a lady's quiet.

I replied that I bore a message from the duke which brooked of no delay, whereupon a bolt was withdrawn, the door partly opened, and the face of a woman appeared.

In the dim light she noted not my person, but demanded irritably that I deliver the message quickly and be gone, but I, placing my knee against the half closed door, thrust it back with such force that the woman was thrown to the floor, where she lay stunned.

ing the entrance to the inner chamber aside, I entered without ceremony, then paused, for the princess was before me.

Aroused by the sound of voices in the antechamber she had risen from a couch and confronted me. The half light touched her with a glow soft as moonlight, revealing the whiteness of her skin, the gentle curve of her throat and neck and the veiled splendor of the soft, dark eyes.

"My lord," said she, "what means this intrusion? 'Tis but poor courtesy which sends thee hither when I would be alone."

She took me for the Duke de Biart. The shadow of the draperies concealed my features, and I being somewhat the size of the nobleman the mistake was easy. I took a step toward her, the gleam of my hilt flashing in the light. She started, her hand going to a little toy dagger which lay upon the table at her side. Suddenly the color which had risen to her cheeks died away, her lips parted and her hand went to her heart.

"M. de Marc," she cried, "M. de Marc, 'tis thou! Thou wilt save me from this madman?"

"Princess," I replied, "none shall harm thee. The king hath sent me to take thee back to Paris."

She smiled softly, laying her hand upon my arm. "Brave M. de Marc," cried she, "would I might!"

The voice of De Rosset checked her words, his face appearing between the curtains.

"Look to thyself, De Marc!" he cried. A cry from the princess made me turn sharply. Beyond the circle of light where the dark canopy of the bed met the wall I saw an evil figure, cloaked and booted, plumed hat upon head and naked blade in hand. 'Twas the Duke de Biart, who had entered noiselessly through a secret passage in the wall.

His eyes were fixed upon me in mute astonishment, nor methinks he recognized in the intruder of the princess' chamber the king's musketeer.

As I wavered, my hand upon the hilt, he advanced slowly, his eyes still fixed upon my face.

"Sir," said he very softly, "what would you with this lady?"

The princess crept to my side. "Brave M. de Marc," she whispered, "trust him not. A sudden thrust!"

"Sir," cried the duke a second time, "what is thy business?"

"At the king's command," replied I shortly.

"Aye, the good king," he muttered. "We were to dine together. What of the king?"

De Rosset stepped across the threshold. "The man is mad," he whispered; "mad as a hare. Beware, De Marc."

The sight of him changed the duke's mood.

"Begone!" he cried; then of a sudden he lunged at me with his sword.

As the blood drawn from the prick he gave me in the shoulder appeared upon the lace of my collar the princess cried out, and De Rosset pressed forward.

Angered by the wound, I made to thrust my opponent through the body, but De Rosset thrust my point aside.

"Wouldst slay a madman?" he cried. "There is another way."

Even as he spoke my point, being turned from its true aim, pierced the duke's shoulder. He started back, a wondrous change coming over him. The mad light in his eyes died out, the letting forth of blood overcoming the malady. With a bewildered gesture he passed his hand across his eyes.

"O God," he muttered, "what thing be this?"

Suddenly, before I could intervene, he threw himself upon his knees before the princess.

"Madame," cried he, "'tis the curse upon my race. 'Twas for that I sought to be a churchman."

A look of great pity came to the lady's eyes. "My lord," said she, "thou art forgiven. The king—"

"The king!" cried he. "I cannot meet the king!"

With a cry of terror he gained his feet and sought blindly for his sword. I thought he would have set upon us and stood on guard, but 'twas against himself he turned the blade.

Quicker than thought he set the hilt against the wall, pressing the point upon his heart so the steel pierced through ere any could raise a staying hand.

De Rosset bent over the quivering body. "God's death!" he muttered. "'Tis a sorry thing. The madness of the Duke de Biart hath slain him."

Then, turning to the princess, who leaned half fainting against my shoulder, spoke he:

"Madame, the horses await below and the king in Paris. Let us ride thither quickly. I warrant M. de Marc will soon become a nobleman."

But what care I for what the king might offer me? In the eyes of the princess I had read that which is not in the gift of kings.

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